



Seeking Sheep, Facing Wolves
Matthew 10:16-33

Well, we are continuing in our series through Matthew's gospel, so let me invite you to Matthew chapter 10 this morning to pick up where we left off.

And just to remind you where we've been the last few weeks in Matthew, the end of chapter 9 is a turning point in the gospel. From chapter 4 through chapter 9, Matthew has focused on the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus. He has been traveling, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, and healing everyone with diseases and afflictions.

He looks on the masses of people and is moved with compassion because they were like sheep with no shepherd, so he encourages his disciples to see the vastness of the harvest and to pray that the Lord would send more laborers into the harvest.

Then last week we looked at the first 15 verses of chapter 10, where Jesus sends his twelve disciples to the "lost sheep of Israel of the house of Israel" with the authority to not only teach and preach, but to heal and cast out demons. Kevin reminded us that "What God wants to get done in the world, he gets done through his people." Flawed, inadequate, sinful, doubting, and ordinary people.

But again, Jesus sees the crowds as sheep without shepherd, then sends his disciples to gather the lost sheep in Israel. This morning, we will hear more instructions from Jesus, saying that though the disciples were sent to seek sheep, they would also face wolves.

They would meet others who wouldn't be interested in the gospel message. People who were apathetic to gospel, and others who were outright hostile towards Christ and anyone who would claim to follow him.

And, of course, the same is true for us today. We are sent by Christ to gather his lost sheep, to make disciples, but in so doing, we won't always be well-received. And you know this, if you've ever spoken up about the gospel, or biblical ethics, or maybe simply because people know you go to church. You want to be a light and see others experience the joy you've found in the gospel, but so often, the response you receive is not joyful acceptance and innocent curiosity. Rather, you've faced apathy or outright hostility.

And if we aren't careful, the hostility we face as followers of Jesus has the potential to radically shape the way we labor in the harvest. This might surprise us. I mean we have good news to share, who doesn't want good news? It might cause us to shrink back from being the witness that we're called to be. Or it might cause us to question whether or not the Lord of the harvest even cares about the lives of his workers. And the presence of wolves might impact is a number of other ways...

BUT there is instruction and encouragement to be found in our passage this morning...

Matthew 10:16-33

16 "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. **17** Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, **18** and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. **19** When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. **20** For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. **21** Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, **22** and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. **23** When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

24 "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. **25** It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

26 "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. **27** What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. **28** And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. **29** Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. **30** But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. **31** Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. **32** So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, **33** but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

So, Jesus is sending out his disciples, and ultimately all of his followers until his return, but he warns them. And as we walk through this passage, first we need to simply point out, the reality of opposition for the follower of Jesus.

I. The Reality of Opposition (16)

Again in verse 16, Jesus says, “I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.” Whereas before, the imagery was that of under-shepherds who were going out to find the sheep who were lost and under threat of predators like wolves, but now *they* are the sheep under the threat of wolves.

And Jesus goes on to give examples of these “wolves” they would have to face. First, in verse 17 and 18, they would face civil and religious authorities.

They would be arrested for their faith and ministry and brought before governors and kings. These represent the Gentile authorities. But they would also be brought before the Jewish courts and be flogged in synagogues.

Synagogues weren't just places of worship; they were also places of instruction and correction. So, punishment for breaking the Jewish law was handled there and flogging was a horrible punishment. Just shy of the death penalty, it was the last thing you'd want. It was very similar to what Jesus endured at the hands of the Romans before his crucifixion. In the Romans' case, when someone was flogged, they would be stripped naked, tied to a pole with his hands high on the pole. A soldier would whip the prisoner all down his back. The whip had several leather straps with metal or bone fragments to tear the flesh. This was such a gruesome method of punishment that at times the prisoner would not survive the beating. There have been accounts in history that describe the flesh tearing so badly that the bones of the victim could be seen.

It was practiced a little differently in the synagogue, though not by much. Jewish law limited the number of lashings someone would endure. The point was corporal punishment, not capital punishment. They wanted to punish the lawbreaker, not kill them. So, the law states that the maximum number of lashes was 39. But still, a prisoner could be whipped up to 39 times for their crime. And Jesus said, guys, this is what you face as you go.

And by the way, we know because of this reference that Jesus isn't describing the ministry of the twelve in this immediate sending, but he's referencing the experience of his church after his resurrection. Because the twelve aren't arrested and brought before Gentile governors or kings, remember they were to go to the sheep of Israel first. This does happen though throughout the book of Acts and has been happening since.

So, the threat from civil authorities is a real threat to the Church in this age. We've seen this in numerous ways throughout the ages in various contexts worldwide. We've seen

it even here in some ways in our country. We'll talk a bit more about how this plays out even today.

But Jesus goes on to say in verse 21, Christians will experience opposition even within their own earthly families. Sometimes, we're related to the wolf. As we live our lives for Christ and seek to share the gospel with those who are closest to us, sometimes we face rejection and hostility. And that is true for some of you, I know. The people you are most desperate to see come to faith are the ones who have treated you the worst. They have spoken ill of you, teased you, maybe worse, mocked you, or altogether shunned you from their lives.

And this, I think, might be the hardest of Jesus' instructions here in this passage, because we might think of civil authorities and think, yeah that doesn't surprise me. Of course, the government is going to look down on the Church and her members. But our own families? I mean, we hope the gospel heals families, unites families, brings harmony to families. But Jesus says, that there will be families completely torn apart because of the gospel. Jesus will go on to talk about that more in the next passage.

But then Jesus says in verse 22, ultimately you will be hated by "all," or "all kinds of people." Again, family, friends, strangers, those with great influence and authority, those with no influence and authority. All kinds of people will hate you.

But notice why in this passage. You will be hated for my "name's sake." Because you say you are follower of Jesus, you will be hated.

And Jesus says, they have hated me and will continue to hate me, and that means they are going to hate you too.

So, Jesus is abundantly clear to the disciples and to us. He's not trying to pull the wool over the sheep's eyes. He makes it known, if you follow me, you will follow in my footsteps, which includes walking among wolves.

This is the reality for all followers of Jesus in this age. We are sent on mission to seek sheep, but we do so in the midst of wolves.

Now, the question then is, how should we do that? How should we face the opposition that is to come our way because we bear the name of Christ? How should we live as we face persecution from civil authorities or even from our own family members?

Thankfully, Jesus gives a lot of instruction here and we see this demonstrated in the lives of his followers as the New Testament unfolds. I want to point out 5 ways that the follower of Christ should walk as we likely encounter wolves...

II. How to Face Opposition

Be...

1. ...wise (16) Again, Jesus says that we are to be “wise as serpents” in verse 16. And to be honest, that hits my ears a little funny, maybe it does to you too. Because we use animals to describe people even today. Sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Positively, we might say he is “strong as an ox,” or “clever as a fox.” But typically, if we liken someone to a snake, then we aren’t complimenting that person. We usually don’t want to be someone that others think of in that way.

But here, Jesus says that his followers should be like snakes. Specifically, “wise as serpents.”

In the context of Matthew’s gospel, we probably get a clue to this meaning at the beginning of the gospel. Earlier in chapter 3, John the Baptist is preaching the gospel of the kingdom, preparing the way of Jesus to come on the scene, and he looks to the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders, and says in Matthew 3:7...

Matthew 3:7

...“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Here John is being sarcastic because he sees these religious leaders among the many who are coming to be baptized and hear about the coming Messiah, and he perceives their hypocrisy. They weren’t really there because they wanted to repent. So, he calls them snakes. But notice what he parallels with the imagery of snakes there. “Who warned you to *flee* from the wrath to come?”

The picture of a snake and the action of fleeing are used here to describe them. And this might be the idea that Jesus is getting at in Matthew 10 about his disciples.

In other words, be wise as a serpent, as someone who knows when to flee. Remember, in the passage just before this, he tells his disciples..

Matthew 10:14

And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.

In other words, sometimes the right response to apathy, sometimes the right response to opposition, persecution, and hostility is to flee. But it will take wisdom to know when to do that. Sometimes you need to speak up again. Sometimes you need to persevere

in sharing the gospel with that hostile individual. But sometimes, the wisest thing to do is to move on, knowing that you were faithful and trust the Lord to do as he sees fit in their heart.

So, be wise in the face of opposition. Don't be overly naive. Be wise as you go out amongst wolves.

Secondly, Jesus says, Be...

2. ...steadfast (16)

Again, in verse 16, he says be "wise as serpents" but also be "innocent as doves."

That word for "innocent," carries with it the idea of "unmixed, pure, uncontaminated, and undefiled." Doves are, of course, white, so their color is symbolic of that purity.

And followers of Jesus ought to be characterized this way...even as they face opposition.

And this is really important because really what this does is it challenges us to remain steadfast in our faith and steadfast in our convictions in those moments where compromising would just so much easier. It would be easier sometimes not to claim Christ. It would be easier sometimes not to pursue biblical holiness. It would save us from ridicule, opposition, marginalization, and hostility if we just gave in a little. We will all be tempted to navigate opposition and hostility to our faith by compromising in some way.

But Jesus says, don't. Be steadfast. Remain pure. Remain innocent, uncontaminated. Don't seek safety or acceptance by identifying more with the wolves than with the sheep.

Later in our New Testaments we have a letter written by one of these apostles, the apostle Peter, and he was writing to Christian who have been exiled for their faith. Suffering persecution they've been forced to flee and notice part of the instruction Peter has for them, and us...

1 Peter 3:13-17

13 Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? **14** But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, **15** but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, **16** having a good conscience, so that,

when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. **17** For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

In other words, even if you're slandered, even if you're reviled, even if you're hated, continue to honor Christ with your life. Walk in holiness. Do good. Treat others with gentleness and respect. In other words, be innocent as doves.

Third instruction from Jesus in Matthew 10, we should be wise, be steadfast, and third, be...

3. ...missionally minded. (18)

Look again at Matthew 10:18, Jesus says...

Matthew 10:18

...and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.

Jesus says, don't lose sight that there is missional purpose in your suffering. You will "bear witness" about me as you are steadfast in the face of opposition. Why? Because it communicates to others, Jesus is worth it. He's worth the trouble. He's worth the ridicule. He's worth the trial. He's worth the flogging. He's worth the suffering. And God might use your suffering as a means for his glory in the sight of those who have yet to believe.

Paul constantly had this mindset in his ministry. And it was important, because he was constantly suffering. Notice what he says in Philippians 1, as he writes from prison for following Christ...

Philippians 1:12-14

12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, **13** so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. **14** And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Paul says, I'm suffering, but not without purpose. I am bearing witness to Christ and others are emboldened as they see me suffer.

So, as you face wolves, be missionally minded. It is not without purpose.

We'll continue, Jesus says fourthly, be...

4. ...calm. (19-20)

Matthew 10:19-20

19 When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. **20** For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

So, here are these relatively uneducated men, arrested and brought to trial, being brought before judges, governors, and professional prosecutors, how are they to not be anxious about what to say in those moments. Jesus, don't be anxious. The Spirit who indwells you will help you speak what needs to be said.

And in the same way, as you face those who oppose the gospel, those who are smarter, more educated, it's easy to be anxious about how to respond. But don't be, Jesus says. The Spirit will help you say what needs to be said and can accomplish all that he purposes through your feeble words.

Finally, Jesus says, be...

5. ...bold (26, 28, 31)

Verse 26, he says, have no fear. In verse 28, he says do not fear. And in verse 31, fear not.

Though we are sheep in the midst of wolves, the sheep have no need to fear. We can be bold.

III. Why can we respond this way? What reasons does Jesus give to encourage us to be bold as we face opposition?

Matthew 10:26-27

26 "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. **27** What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.

1. Judgment is coming. Ultimately, He knows the sheep from the wolves. God sees all the ways you are mistreated. All the things said to you and about you. All the ways wolves seek to harm you. He knows it all. And he will provide justice when he returns.

Boldness in the face of opposition is having a steadfast belief that opposition is temporary, and one day the sheep will enter eternal rest without fear of wolves.

Matthew 10:28

28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

2. Man can kill your body, but not your soul. And confidence grows when we realize, even if they do destroy your body, God has promised to raise your body in the resurrection. God has promised to reverse the very worst that wolves can do to the sheep. So, the sheep don't need to fear.

Matthew 10:29-31

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. **30** But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. **31** Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

3. God, your Sovereign Father, loves you.

Sparrows were the cheapest bird available. Small, insignificant, easy to overlook. And yet, God cares for and provides for each one. How much more will the Lord care for and provide for you and me, as his adopted sons and daughters?

CONCLUSION

Now, much more could be said about each of these points, but the main point being, Jesus has warned us as his people, that in this age before he returns, we live with the reality of threat from wolves. Those who oppose Jesus, and thus, oppose his followers.

But we need not fear. Because of the One we follow, we can be wise, steadfast, calm, missionally minded, and we can be bold as we face opposition for the gospel. That's the instruction we find here.

But this passage also helps us in some other ways, beyond mere instruction.

This warning also serves us by calling us to **preparedness**. Again, there are wolves around. And though you and I likely haven't faced persecution like that described here in this passage, we might someday. We don't know. According to Jesus, there is a chance. So, we shouldn't be surprised if it does. We shouldn't be surprised when those with governing authority or religious zeal seek to harm Christ by harming his Church.

This warning also serves us by calling us to be **aware** of real persecution in the world even today. Many of our brothers and sisters around the world today really do still

experience persecution at this level. A ministry called Open Doors promotes awareness of global persecution against the Church. They cite that more than 365 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution for their faith. The countries with the highest levels of persecution today are North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, and Nigeria. In fact, just a few weeks ago, a video was going around social media of a church in Nigeria whose building had just been burnt to the ground by Muslim extremists. But the video showed the church gathered once again in the rubble, singing songs of praise together. It's important we know that happens today, and it's important that we pray for our brothers and sisters around the world.

But this warning is also meant to serve us by way of **encouragement**. Regardless of the level of hostility you face, you have a Sovereign Father who loves you, cares for you, sees it all, and will one day vindicate you and will vindicate his Church against all of her opponents. So, take heart.

And beyond that, Jesus, who is our high priest knows persecution and opposition. He faced wolves who wanted to see him killed, he faced the ultimate enemies of Satan and death, and he responded with the steadfastness, boldness, wisdom, and faith in the Father that we so often fail to respond with.

And so, we look to the One we follow in faith, knowing that his life and death on our behalf grants us forgiveness for all the ways we've failed to respond with innocence and boldness. And we look to his finished work because Jesus has defeated the ultimate wolves of Satan, sin, and death. So, look to him in faith today. Rejoice in his finished work on our behalf. Pray that you and I would respond to persecution that demonstrates our unwavering belief in the gospel.

CONFESSION

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

1 Peter 4:19

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

VERSES

Matthew 10:16-33

Matthew 3:7

Matthew 10:14

1 Peter 3:13-17

Matthew 10:18

Philippians 1:12-14

Matthew 10:19-20

Matthew 10:26-27

Matthew 10:28

Matthew 10:29-31

1 Peter 4:19

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How have you personally faced opposition to your faith?
2. How are you tempted to respond to opposition to your faith?
3. How do Jesus' instructions challenge your most common response?
4. How does the gospel encourage you as you face the potential threat of wolves?
5. Spend time praying for one another that you would be wise, innocent, and bold as you face opposition to the gospel. Spend time praying for our brothers and sisters around the world who face high levels of persecution today.